

# *A Woman Alone*

## *Chapter 1*

**S**TEPHEN WAS WATCHING the two girls, though they were not aware of it. Nor was *he* aware that his young sister, Annette, was watching him. He had found an old theodolite in the attic at Skyburriowe and had taken it out in a half-hearted attempt to survey the fields between Breage and Trequean. Since they would all be his one day, it seemed a worthwhile occupation for an idle late-summer afternoon. But the moment he had spotted Roseanne Kitto and her friend Mary whatsername through its telescope, he had dropped the intention completely — and doubled his pretence at taking it seriously.

They were still a good half-mile away, but he would know Miss Kitto among a thousand. It was not just her bonny figure, her pale green eyes, and flaxen hair, but something altogether more mysterious and special that seemed to cling about her. For more than two years now he had loved her from a distance — that unbridgeable distance which separates the squire's son and the stonemason's daughter.

In the next field, her eyes glued to the binoculars her father had given her three years ago on her fourteenth birthday, Annette chuckled. For she had also spied the two village girls, picking blackberries and working their way slowly along the schoolhouse lane toward Trequean. Knowing very well what one of them meant to Stephen, she settled to enjoy what she felt sure would be one of the more interesting encounters she and her binoculars had witnessed.

Roseanne Kitto and Maria Curnow were discussing their respective beaux: Mark Bodilly and Johnny Tregear. All four of them had attended the same village school — and so, indeed, had Stephen and his sister in their infant years. The girls had passed the place half a mile back; in fact, the sight of it had started their present conversation — for Roseanne and Mark had been more or less promised to each other from those times, when she was fourteen and he a year or so older. Now, seven years on, he had just embarked on a rather precarious career as cattle dealer and auctioneer, having squandered his life so far in various menial posts only to see advancement go to the sons of the owners or their chief clerks.

Maria plucked a dandelion from the hedgerow and blew at its down to see whether anyone loved her or loved her not.

“Mark do have a nice smile when he remembers it,” Roseanne said.

“You got to allow that.”

Maria paused between puffs. “Johnny don’t have to remember. He’s always smiling.”

“Call that a smile?” Roseanne chuckled. “More a vacant grin, if you ask me. You still see him, do ’ee?”

“In and out.” Maria gave a casual little toss of her head to show it meant little. “He’s gone to live down Falmouth. He’s doing very well by all accounts.” She threw the denuded seed head away. “He loves me. But I’m sure I don’t know who.”

“Last I heard, Johnny was working in Rosewarne’s Export Brewery there.” Roseanne eyed a cluster of blackberries, huge and ripe. “We should ought to pick them,” she said. “They’ll kill we if us don’t bring home a pint at least.”

“A pint each,” Maria agreed glumly.

They paused and reached among the thorns for the glistening black fruit. Some were so ripe that they fell when a neighbour was plucked. Maria squatted to find them among the long grass at the foot of the hedge.

“Gusson! Leave they,” Roseanne chided. “There’s millions down Trequean.”

Her friend rose reluctantly. “It do seem so wasteful, somehow,” she complained.

The moment they set off again, Roseanne picked up the earlier thread of their conversation: “At least Johnny haven’t fallen in a vat of ale and drowned himself.”

Maria made no reply.

“Like in they stinging nettles!” She dissolved in fits of laughter.

“Ha ha, very funny I’m sure,” Maria said tetchily.

There was a silence. They sauntered on past another cluster of ripe fruit, too small and thorny to detain them. Maria shooed a swarm of midges away. “I wouldn’t say that Mark Bodilly has done so well for himself as might have been expected,” she remarked casually. Then, in a more energetic voice, “Here, you think that’s rain, do ’ee? Over the Lizard there?”

“Very likely.” Roseanne bagged a small handful of blackberries from an overhanging spray, two of which she ate with a guilty sideways glance at her friend. “Too soft to keep,” she explained.

Maria accepted the assurance with a disbelieving nod. “Specially when you remember he was always top of the class and that,” she added.

Roseanne remembered the pride she had always felt when Mark’s name was read out, always first. To be the belle of the best had been splendid.

“Auctioneer and cattle dealer!” Maria sighed. “That’s a bit of a come-down.”

“He isn’t but twenty-three years old,” Roseanne answered stoutly.

“And what’s his father? Only a stonemason, like mine.” She avoided adding, “And like yours, and all,” for Maria’s father, too, was “only” a stonemason. Maria, no doubt, would be stung into pointing out that her father was an *engineer*-stonemason — merely because he’d helped build ten yards of the sea wall down at Porthleven harbour.

“Mark taking you to Ram-Buck Fair, is he?” Maria asked.

“Very likely,” Roseanne said again.

“He never asked you yet, then?”

“He don’t hardly need to. I suppose he can more or less take it for granted.”

Maria sniffed. “I’d never let no man take me for granted.”

“I never said he do take *me* for granted,” Roseanne countered. “Only that I’ll go with ’n to Ram-Buck, same as always.”

“Same as makes no difference.”

They sauntered down the serpentine, switchback lane that led from Breage to the coastal road at Trequean, each trying in her desultory, rather bored way to provoke the other into an outburst of petulant anger — which would have scored a small point or two in the undeclared contest between them. Neither, however, yielded any such satisfaction — which, paradoxically, satisfied them both.

“Here!” Maria declared when they reached the coastal road. “Look who that is, then!” She had just started to gather blackberries in earnest — by chance, near a gap in the hedge. Now she moved a little to one side to allow Roseanne to peer through it, too. “On the far side the field there.”

“Young Squire Morvah,” Roseanne murmured.

“What’s he doing?”

It was not immediately apparent. He was stooping behind some sort of apparatus, which was supported on a tripod. It was too small for a camera and too complicated for a telescope. He would peer through the back of it, make some adjustments, then stand up and study something on the side of it before jotting down his observations in a little notebook.

“That’s like old Coad did out Montpelier when Miss Hervey sold up,” Roseanne commented. “Surveying, he called it.” She turned wide-eyed to her friend. “You think that’s what ’tis? The squire selling up? Sent his son out to survey the estate before they sell up?”

“Very likely,” Maria agreed, craning her neck to peer through the gap again. “Oh my gidge! He’s seen us with that thing.”

Stephen Morvah rose behind his apparatus and waved at them. His indistinct cry reached them in its dying moments.

“He’s coming,” Roseanne said. “What shall us say to ’n?” She had no notion of the young man’s feelings toward her.

“Whatever we please,” Maria replied with more assurance than she felt. “There’s no law against picking blackberries, or so I devoutly hope.”

“Anyway, we’re not on his side the hedge. You ever spoken to him before, have you? Since school, I mean?”

“When I was eight and he was about fourteen, paddling in the rocks at Megaliggar.” Maria giggled. “I never had a stitch o’ clothing up — and no more did he. I don’t know which of us was more surprised!”

“Well, don’t you dare mention that!” Roseanne rolled her eyes in anguish.

Maria shot her a look of withering pity. “As if I would.”

The young man, now half way over the pasture, broke into a slow trot.

His sudden move annoyed his sister. It was plainly his intention to hobnob with the two maids through the hedge; but not only would he now have his back to her, he would also obscure one or other of them most of the time. Crouching low she doubled along the headland of the neighbouring field and made a new approach up the road from Trequean.

“He’s turned out some proper ’ansum young fellow,” Roseanne murmured appreciatively as he drew near.

Not quite a Greek god, he was nonetheless “proper ’ansum” with his fair wavy hair and his frank, blue eyes. “Good afternoon to ye,” he called out when he came within a dozen paces.

“Afternoon, Squire.” The two girls curtsyed.

“Oh, I say — none of that, what? Don’t I know you both? Miss Maria Curnow and Miss Roseanne Kitto, isn’t it?”

The girls giggled, glanced at each other, and giggled again.

“Out blackberrying, eh?”

“There’s a burr few down here,” Roseanne told him.

“Indeed. There’s quite a harvest this side, too. Why don’t you come in? I’ll give you a hand — pick for both of you.”

Roseanne gazed up and down the deserted road. “We shouldn’t want to go disturbing you, sir,” she said hesitantly.

“Nonsense! I’m only trying out a surveyor’s theodolite I discovered in the attic at home, but I should have brought one of the gardener’s boys with me to hold the staff. Now I’m rather glad I didn’t.” He took a pace closer to the gap and smiled at them. “I’m not proposing to *eat* you, you know. Though I might eat a few blackberries. Go back to the gate there. You don’t want to tear those lovely dresses trying to get through here.”

Without waiting for an answer he strode back the fifty yards or so to the gate.

The girls looked uncertainly at each other. “Can’t really say no,” Maria offered. “It would be rude,” Roseanne agreed. So they turned about and made for the gate, too.

“Lovely dresses!” Maria said scornfully, looking at their serviceable blue linen skirts.

“Considerate, though,” Roseanne replied.

He was waiting with the gate already opened and a warm smile of welcome.

Annette found a new vantage that would be side-on to them as they worked their way back along the hedge to the gap where Stephen had first accosted them.

“No bulls or anything?” Roseanne peered cautiously beyond him into the field.

“He’s earning his keep in the yard today,” he replied. Then, to Maria, “I don’t suppose you remember the last time we actually met, Miss Curnow? It wasn’t a thousand miles from here. I’ve seen you often since then, of course — out and about — but that was our last actual meeting.”

Maria, too embarrassed to reply, swept past him into the field. He smiled at Roseanne and said, “Oh dear! I seem to have put my foot in it again!”

“It could have been said more tactful,” she chided.

His smile broadened and Roseanne realized he now knew that Maria had just told her of the incident. Perhaps he wasn’t so green as he liked to put on. “What’s that thing for?” she asked, nodding at his abandoned theodolite.

He was right about the abundance of the harvest on the inside of the hedge; it was twice as prolific as the verge they had just abandoned. Maria was already at work, filling her pannikin as fast as she could.

“I’ll pick for you until we’ve caught up,” Stephen said to Roseanne, reaching for the highest and most luscious fruits. “And as for theodolites, well, they enable one to make maps.”

“Ah.”

“Trigonometry and things like that,” he added, dumping his first handful into her jug.

Several were squashed. She looked at them coldly and gave him a tolerant smile.

“I’ll do better,” he promised. To the hedge itself he muttered, “Can’t put a foot right, today.”

Both girls laughed and after that the conversation somehow flowed more easily.

Poor Annette now realized that hearing was going to be more important than seeing. Abandoning all attempts at hiding, she wandered up the road, trusting that the hedge would be thick enough to conceal her when she drew within earshot.

Stephen asked the girls what their fathers were doing nowadays. Maria said hers was working on the improvements to the sea wall by Penzance station. Roseanne said nothing. He turned back to her. “Didn’t I hear something about Mr Kitto working for that potty woman over at Helford Passage?” he asked. “The one who used to live at Montpelier. She’s

blasting half the cliff away or something, isn't she?"

"Mrs Scawen," Roseanne said.

"That's the one."

"He's doing a bit work for her, yes," she agreed. "I don't know about potty. She's making a hanging garden there, so you can walk all the way down to the sea through grottos and tunnels and terraces and that. He says its proper 'ansum."

"Proper expensive, too, I'd say," he commented dourly. "Not that she's short of it, mind. I expect your father could pretty well name his price, eh?"

She looked him square in the eye, laughed at his bluntness, and shook her head.

He wondered how he could look into those eyes, so close, and not die of a heart attack; but he was outwardly all collected as he dropped another handful into her jug. "Better?" he asked.

She nodded and went on picking. "I got to get back home and do the milking," she announced.

"Old Mr Coad, he's got one of them." Maria nodded at the abandoned theodolite. "I saw him use it out Montpelier before that Mrs Scawen sold up there. Sold it to your father, I believe, didn't she, sir?" She watched closely for any response to the mention of a sale.

"Mr Coad uses it rather more proficiently than me, I hope," was all he said. After a short silence he added, "Ram-Buck Fair next week."

For a while they discussed the prospects for that. The weather had been mixed for some weeks now; they were certainly owed a settled spell. It had rained last year, so perhaps this year would be better. Pity it was held in such an out-of-the-way place. Helston Harvest Fair was much better, really.

"I was at Pallas House last week," he told them. "Old Hamill Oliver — you know him, surely — he told me that all Celtic fairs and meetings were held in out-of-the-way places like that. He said we couldn't trust each other enough to invite outsiders into our own villages so we always met on neutral ground." He sniffed. "I don't think we've changed much, either."

Listening to him talk, Roseanne decided he was quite a pleasant fellow once he forgot who he was and just spoke about things that interested him. However, she was still a little resentful of the lordly-jocular way he had invited them into his field — when, in fact, he had no right to keep them out. It was well established that anyone could go into any field to pick berries and mushrooms, just as they could go through the woods and gather all the sticks they could carry. "Are you going to Ram-Buck Fair yourself?" she asked

"Roseanne!" Maria shot her a glance of surprise.

“What?” she asked truculently.

“She thinks you’re inviting me,” Stephen explained, speaking as if to a foreigner who might not understand local customs.

His bluntness left her momentarily at a loss. Then, like some spiny creature that cannot back out of a hole it has dug, she pressed onward.

“Well, why not?” she asked.

“Roseanne!” Maria’s surprise turned to alarm. “Pay her no heed, sir. ’Tis her humour, that’s all.”

“Oh, is it?” He treated the explanation as a serious diagnosis. “Is it really?” In fact, he was delighted. He had no idea it would be so easy.

Roseanne concentrated on an extra-large bunch of berries. “As you wish,” she said.

“Oh well, in that case, I accept. I’ll be in my gig at the top of Penhale Row with my hair all oiled and frizzed, as they say, at half past one. If that’s not too early?”

Now the surprise was all Roseanne’s. How had she allowed such a thing to happen? What would she tell Mark, never the world’s easiest man to talk to? It was just a joke that got out of hand ... but all she could think of to say was, “How did you know I live in Penhale Row?”

With an oddly ritual deference he offered her a handful of perfect berries. “It may,” he said, “have something to do with the fact that I am not yet blind.”

She accepted the fruit and then told him she was only joking and he needn’t consider himself held to it.

He turned to Maria. “Did it sound like a joke to you?” he asked.

She grinned and shook her head vigorously.

“Maria!” Roseanne said with an edge of desperation in her tone. “You know I was! How could I ever have meant that seriously?” Her eyes were wide with pleading. “And you know, too ...”

“What? What do I know.”

“You *know!*”

“I know the sky’s blue and water’s wet.”

He joined in. “It didn’t sound like a joke to her, Miss Kitto. And I’m sorry to have to say that I took you to be in solemn earnest. I accepted your invitation in good faith.”

“Oh, very *well!*” Roseanne stressed the word in her frustration at being unable to stamp her feet — for fear of losing half her blackberries. “But don’t imagine I shall enjoy it much.” Her eyes narrowed. “And don’t imagine I’m going to let *you* enjoy it much, either!”

On the far side of the hedge Annette hugged herself in a positive ecstasy.